RANCHO SANTA ANA BOTANIC GARDEN

LEAFLETS
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PRUNUS ILICIFOLIA
HOLLY-LEAVED CHERRY

Prepared
by
RANCHO SANTA ANA BOTANIC GARDEN
of the
Native Plants of California

Santa Ana Canyon
Orange County
California

No. 28. April 26, 1940

PRUNUS ILICIFOLIA
HOLLY-LEAVED CHERRY

Rosaceae Rose Family

Evergreen shrub or small tree 20 to 30 ft. high, usually broader than high; trunk to 8 in. in diam., with smooth, dark gray bark; twigs with reddish or brown bark. Leaves alternate, rigid, elliptic or oval, obtuse or acute, coarsely or finely toothed, undulate, petioles about ¼ in. long; young leaves light green, the mature deep, rich green above, paler beneath, 1 to 2 in. long. Flowers white, about 3/8 in. across, borne in leafless axillary racemes 3 to 6 in. long, appearing just before or with the new leaves; pedicels ¼ to ½ in. long; calyx tube funnel-form, 3/16 in. broad; calyx lobes 5, short triangular; petals 5, spreading, ovate or oval, inserted with sepals on summit of calyx tube; stamens about 20, filaments of unequal lengths, anthers 2-celled; ovary 2-ovuled, with a single style. Fruit a fleshy drupe about ¾ in. thick, reddish-purple (rarely yellow) at maturity, pulp sweet but thin, 1-seeded (rarely 2-seeded), the seed coat tough but not stony. In germination the seed coat splits, the fleshy cotyledons remain within, the hypocotyl develops a long taproot and the epicotyl an erect stem on which the first few leaves are opposite.

The genus Prunus (ancient Latin name for the Plum) includes over 75 species of the North Temperate Zone, Tropical America and Asia. Common members of the genus are the Peach, Apricot, Nectarine and Almond, of which there are hundreds of strains.

Prunus ilicifolia (species name from Ilex, the Holly and folia, leaf) was discovered at Santa Barbara by Thos. Nuttall, an American botanist, who described it in 1840 under the generic name Cerasus. Walpers transferred it to Prunus in 1843. Roemer, in 1847, placed it in Laurocerasus, where it properly belongs, but common usage keeps it in the all-inclusive genus Prunus. Prunus Lyonii (Catalina Cherry) of the California Islands is a well known closely related species with larger, nearly entire leaves and larger, nearly black fruits. Hybrids between this and P. ilicifolia appear occasionally when plants are grown from seeds collected where both grow together.

There are several common names for Prunus ilicifolia, of which Holly-Leaved Cherry, Evergreen Cherry, Mountain Cherry, California Cherry and Islay are best known. The latter is Spanish, but is thought to have been of Indian origin.

The Holly-Leaved Cherry is found from Napa Co., south

through the Coast Ranges to Baja California. It inhabits hillsides, ridges and valley floors, but is largely confined to coarse, well drained soils. Considerable variation occurs in the size and toothing of the leaves. On San Marcos Pass, Santa Barbara Co., the leaves are narrow and resemble those of the Catalina Cherry. Plants growing in the dry chaparral are frequently not more than 6 ft. high, while in the richer soils of canyons small trees 20 to 30 ft. high are common. From March to May the new leaves are a pleasing light green in contrast to the deep, dark green of the mature ones. The small creamy white flowers appear with the new leaves and are usually so abundant that the foliage is hidden. By September the fruits turn red to mature a reddish-purple. The thin flesh is edible, but of no particular use, except that birds are fond of it. Rodents gather the seeds.

Great quantities of the Holly-Leaved Cherry are gathered and used with the berries of the Toyon (Photinia arbutifolia) for Christmas wreaths. The practice of cutting branches for this purpose stimulates new growth and the same plants produce crops of foliage year after year.

Prunus ilicifolia has been used to a limited extent as an ornamental shrub in California gardens for many years. It is an ideal background or hedge plant for use in areas where it is difficult to apply water. It can be grown in nearly any soil but thrives best in coarse, well drained types.

Propagation of the Holly-Leaved Cherry is by seeds. The fruits should be gathered as soon as mature and the pulp removed. The seeds can be planted immediately, but if desired may be kept for several months. Under no circumstances should the seeds be dried in the sun, for this will kill them. The ideal way to grow this species is to plant several seeds in each spot where a plant is wanted. Well prepared holes (1 to 3 ft. deep) filled with coarse soil and humus will enable the roots to penetrate deeply and by the first summer the plants will be well established. Watering will be necessary the first season, but the ground should not be kept constantly wet or soggy. When once established the plants should not require irrigation. Plants may also be started in the nursery by placing several seeds in deep containers such as large square tar paper pots or tin cans. This species should never be grown in pots, for coiled roots are invariably produced. It is also impractical to attempt to grow this species in the field since the plants cannot be balled with any degree of success.

RANCHO SANTA ANA BOTANIC GARDEN

Of The Native Plants of California.

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In Memory of John W. Bixby

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Purpose: A scientific institution devoted to the growth and study of the native plants of California for their botanical, horticultural and popular features.

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